

Nude

Pirated Edition

A short story
by
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Nudge

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The Master was truly evil.

Not like the small fries, who would kill a few people for enjoyment or out of madness, or like some of the royals of those days, who would wage wars for esoteric reasons. No, the Master was a creative genius and that meant cruelty beyond measure.

Like their predecessors, the two dogs came from the same litter. The first year, the Master treated all with that firm kindness which the breed required. Despite the firmness, that was a good year for them. They grew up to be strong and loyal guard dogs, and they even loved their Master. However, strong and loyal was not all He required. On their first birthday, the Master took away their litter mates, and stopped feeding the two brothers for a few days. When their hunger reached a peak, he arrived in their room with a large chopping knife. Despite their empty bellies, the two remained disciplined, each giving a paw at a simple command. The Master tightly bound those paws before skilfully chopping them off. The pair would end their fasting with a taste of their brother's meat, followed by the other siblings for the rest of the week.

The Master watched them carefully after this. Evaluating, judging. Were they ferocious enough? Did they remain loyal to him? Did the brothers' bond survive? Previous experiments had resulted in the dogs attacking either him or fighting each other to the death. But when it worked, the treatment's results were magnificent.

Slowly He relaxed His supervision. After a while they were trusted to guard the estate as the Master returned to His other evil doings, though trespassers mostly seemed to consist of the local monkeys and the odd burglar. The last thing they would see was the mad gleam in the two dogs' eyes as they were ravaged methodically. The dogs never did enjoy their victims' meat, so results of their efforts would remain to keep away the smarter trespassers.

For the Master was working on his plot to gather power. He and His allies thought the plan solid, but it would not do to have even the slightest whisper of a rumour reach the ears of those who would have a the smallest of chances of hindering it. Scholars capable of devising counter measures, if they existed, would do so out of mere curiosity, as a mental exercise more than with the expectation of ever needing them. The Master knew that kind very well. No, that would not do at all.

One day, the Master made a serious error with his guards. The mistake was a small one. Indeed, the Master did not notice it Himself, his mind had been concentrated on other things. His frustration had been slowly building up at the failure of a key experiment, to the point of needing

to vent. The dog seemed a convenient target. Sentient. Truly satisfying to kick, in particular their heads.

After the incident, the dogs' madness seemed expanded. The master was so overjoyed with this that he did not notice the intelligence which slowly joined the mad gleam in their eyes. Where before the ravaging was spontaneous, now the dogs *knew* they were performing their master's wishes. They considered. *Reasoned*.

For years, all seemed to go well. The plot progressed. The brothers guarded. The master kept oblivious to the tiny crack in the dogs' loyalty. One day, what seemed like a small girl appeared at the gates.

"Hello."

A hostile growl answered.

"Got a message from a dove the other day,"

It turned questioning.

"Since I was in the neighbourhood any ways, I was asked to have a chat with you two."

A surprised yelp.

"I don't know either."

An incredulous grunt from the brother.

"When a dove brings a message, it's better not to ignore it," a gentle scolding.

Back to growling from both of the dogs.

"Is he worth this loyalty, then?"

Silence answered her question.

"I thought so. Think it over, will you?"

For the next month the girl visited each morning, before sunrise, at the gate. Each time, she was greeted by growls from the brothers, though they conversed extensively.

"You thought I was human? Finally got the smell right, then," on one day.

"He did *what*?" which was answered with a raised prosthetic paw as confirmation, another day.

"I did have some trouble forgetting to support the weight. That caused some problems on the stairs in the first inn I visited," after a questioning bark, the next day.

At the last visit she asked, "have you considered?"

Bark.

"Thank you. When you do decide, you'll know what to do."

Both dogs barked the question at the same time.

“Thank you! You’ll be welcome to join,” she smiled in answer, “I also enjoyed our chats.” As she turned to leave, “I’ve asked for a dove to find you, to tell you where you can join me, even if you decide not to help out.”

The two dogs watched her leave with damp eyes and folded ears. The year that followed was dreary, even in comparison to the previous ones. The master was preparing the finishing touches to his plot, so he didn’t notice the change in his prized guardians, or even the improved smell of the gardens. The brothers, nowadays, kept chasing, but always managed to let their quarry escape with just a few flesh wounds and torn clothes to ensure their reputation remained unscathed. Those few moments of fun, however, did little to console the gap they now noticed being in their hearts. If they were honest with themselves, they were even losing their enjoyment in the chase.

The master rarely left his estate. During one of those rare trips, to arrange the restocking of his depleted test subjects, the brothers entered the main mansion for the first time of their lives. They had never before even considered crossing the doormat, so the master had neglected to forbid them to do so. The door opened after a nudge, the estate was well guarded, after all. The brothers sniffed, looked and listened for any activity inside the building. After a silent glance they split up. They had a huge building to cover in this scouting expedition.

They still had not decided what to do with the request, but their curiosity had been awakened. What was their master up to? What had solicited a divine nudge, even if only a slight one? They silently moved through the house in the following hours. When they were familiar with the layout they rejoined each other to smell a strange path, left by their master, which disappeared into a blank wall. Silently, they sat for a while, next to each other, until one of them sniffed the air, tracing their master to one of the paintings on the left side. Standing against the wall on his hind legs, he pushed with his prosthetic. The mechanism activated, they could feel some rumbling through the wooden floor as the blank wall slid backwards and moved aside. The new corridor extended the one they were in, as if the moved wall never existed.

Onwards they moved, their stealth only interrupted by the taps of their legs hitting the luxurious wood. The corridor turned more silent and dark as they went further, branching out into a small labyrinth.

Taptap

A door which smelled of strangers over here.

Taptap

A trail of the mixed stranger-smell to the meat storage over there.

Taptap

A strange, dead, smell behind that other door around the corner. Not smelling like a dead thing, just ... death itself. They quickly passed that door.

Taptap

A door at the end of one of the corridors smelled strongest of the master. They studied it and its

lock, sniffing and feeling with their noses. Aged wood and iron. They considered a while. *Is he worth this loyalty?*

Not really, but the master was the master. He had been the centre of their world, and, so they had thought, would be so for ever. *Is he worth this loyalty?*

Their eyes became clouds of madness. The master was the master, but had long ago ceased to be the Master. Still, they waited. Neither moving forwards, nor back to the only task they had ever known.

The brothers' ears perked up at a new thought. Both raised their prosthetics, claws extended. Sharper than the finest surgeon's glass and tougher than dragon's scales. They sliced and watched the door slowly tilt backwards.

"Is he worth this loyalty?"

The brothers passed over the fallen door, each covering an opposing side of the study as they entered. Where the rest of the estate was luxurious, this room was strictly utilitarian. A stone fire place, a comfortable desk next to the window with a view on the gardens. Even the floor changed to smooth, unpretentious, rock. And bookcases. Entire walls with bookshelves filled tightly with books. Both raised their noses as they started their search.

Something was off.

It started in the fireplace. A few embers remained glowing, or had they started to glow again? Slowly, as the brothers were sniffing out the bookshelves, the glow increased. The dogs noticed the smell and turned towards the fireplace as it started to crackle. Within the flames they could easily discern two glowing red spots. Embers? Meanwhile the room slowly filled with swirling, smoky smelling fumes. The brothers sat as they watched the elegantly swirling movement, their heads lightly drowsed by the smell.

What, this, be?

The two embers kept glowing brighter, the colour shifting, first, from red to white, then turning a pure, transparent but bright, blue.

You, another foolish question, ask?

The embers, flames and smoke had turned into a harmony, a single creature enveloping the two brothers, both stood as if hypnotised.

You, him, be-not?

They barked delightedly at this new experience. For the first time since losing the paw, they moved as puppies, playful, dancing. Jumping high, to nip at the swirls, or just moving the nose through the smoke to watch the trails.

Happiness, miss.

Another twin bark at that, as they quieted down.

Leave, can-not. Him, I, bound.

A growl.

Him, hate!

The temperature in the study rose a few notches at that.

Evil! Hate! Hate! Hate!

The entire room lit up with a flash.

Two alarmed yelps.

Sorry. You-flame-be-not, forget.

The flames dimmed at that, large parts of the bright swirls even turning into smoke.

A questioning bark.

He, soul-I, steal. Room-dead, keep.

Room-dead. Only one place they knew that would fit that description. Bad news. Still, the brothers did not hesitate to move.

You, search?

Two barks answered as they exited the study.

They had the corridors' smells completely mapped on the way in, so they could effortlessly zero in on that door they had skipped so readily on their way in. The smell of true death, which is as much like that of days-long dead cadavers as the sun is to a blown out candle, is a smell one is unlikely to forget, but ancient mental mapping talents developed for a hunt on the plains eased the navigation this labyrinth significantly. The door and lock were of a different material, black and smooth, but yielded to the brothers' slicing just as easily as the wooden one. The door fell back with a loud bang. The dogs waited outside the pitch black entrance.

They sensed that this room was guarded, and guarded well. Something shifted in the darkness, making a rustling noise as quills, like a porcupine's, bristled. Slowly, the dogs moved in to try to make out what was inside.

Out spewed a dark, thick liquid.

It was so foul, a skunk would have flinched, how could they have ever thought the earlier smell to be bad? The brothers flew backwards from the stink, their orientation completely skewed as their mental smell-maps were exorcised from existence. As they moved in opposite directions from that orifice hell would be proud of, a tentacle struck one of them, quills piercing the paw with the prosthetic to haul him in.

A cutting howl sounded as drops of the earlier splash entered flesh via those needles. The other brother turned at that howl as it went on and on. Insanity returned to his eyes in full force, as he took aim at the source of the spiny tentacle. The howling continued to cut into his bones and mind. He took a leap, with gaping jaws.

Utter madness.

Another stream of that syrupy concoction stopped the dog in mid air, clogging his nose and stinging the inside of his mouth. And the taste! Amplified arsenic, serrano pepper, wasabi, salt and hydrochloric acid, each burning or stinging in their own characteristic manner, with on top of that, that horrid smell, solid enough to have turned into flavour hammering its way into the dog's mind. Emptied of all other thoughts, the dog ran straight forward. Whether by accident or design, his path led straight into that dark doorway towards the source of his torture.

The tentacle reacted, smashing the other dog into the wall in an attempt to catch its attacker, then coiling inwards, leaving the suffering brother lying in the corridor. Too late. The dazed dog watched as his brother reached the creature proper. First bumping it off balance, then slashing with those sharp claws. The view was blocked by the spines. Judging from the highly pitched screams, the dog was gaining the upper paw. Now, the foul liquid flowed out as a river, and the pitch of the screams increased, but, suddenly, the tentacle gave a final twitch and fell, spreading waves, before the room behind that entrance turned quiet.

Struggling, to shake off the pain, dizziness from the hit and the smell, the dog moved into the chamber. He muzzled his brother for a short while, who, miraculously, still had life left in him. After a quick lick, the dog moved past the owner of those spines, further into the dome shaped chamber, where a purple bead floated in the centre. It seemed to swallow the surrounding light, creating a ring of absence around it. The brother daintily took it in his jaws, first gently pulling, but retrieving it with a jerk of its head when it didn't give. The dog stood a while, swaying on his legs as his world eventually stopped spiralling, fighting down his nausea.

The brother near the entrance opened his eyes, watching as the other dog stabilised himself. He turned at the warning bark, too late as two tentacles pulled down a loose stone at the top of the dome and smashed it down on his head in one move.

A short pause, as the world seemed to wait for something momentous.

Then the calm was broken, first by a purple line, flashing straight through the wall, its light reflecting throughout the chamber, then by the dome caving in. The dog whimpered as he tried to leave, but got buried under the stones.

Silence.

Mangled, beaten, soaked. The dog could only wait for it to end.

Darkness.

Seconds took hours.

Cold.

Strength was failing.

Soul-brother-you, save.

A familiar presence.

Mind-brother-you, most, lose.

Warmth returning to his limbs.

Leftover-him, save? We, price, pay?

What price?

Lifetime.

No price at all, then.

Agree

Oblivion turned into flames as the dog lost consciousness.

A single dog stood at the gate. Two prosthetic legs. Eyes that sometimes contained a transparent flickering, like that of a candle flame, but blue. Now, the fur had turned a dusty grey like burned out coals, with hints of true blackness under that coat. He slashed a single time and pushed the gate, but turned around as it squeaked open. He regarded the estate with strangely gentle eyes, hardening as he fixed them on the mansion.

Power-him, allow-not.

A sense of agreement from his brother's leftover mind, close enough that it could be his own, or was it? The eyes flashed a hot blue, then the dogs turned around to walk through the gate.

Smoke could be seen to billow out of the windows as walked into their new life. Perhaps they should seek out a certain dove...
